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# Affect Matters: When Writing Feedback Leads to Negative Feeling

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## **Abstract**

A continuous challenge in the writing classroom is maintaining openness and positivity around feedback. There are myriad factors that influence the felt experience of the feedback process, and the researchers wanted to understand better how students experience and perceive negative moments, as well as what factors remain salient in their minds after the fact. Therefore, we surveyed students nationwide who had taken a writing intensive course to learn about the moments when they were not able to take teacher feedback and use it to revise, as well as the times when they used feedback against their own judgment. Drawing on Alice Glarden Brand's affective continuum to code the open responses qualitatively, the researchers found that students' expressions of those negative moments often reflected hierarchy, felt disrespect, and confusion; their desire was most often for more time and space, for respect, and for clearly worded, consistent instructions.

## **Keywords**

Affect, feedback, revision, writing instruction

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## Affect Matters: When Writing Feedback Leads to Negative Feeling

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A continuous challenge in the writing classroom is maintaining openness and positivity around feedback. There are myriad factors that influence the felt experience of the feedback process, and the researchers wanted to understand better how students experience and perceive negative moments, as well as what factors remain salient in their minds after the fact. Therefore, we surveyed students nationwide who had taken a writing intensive course to learn about the moments when they were not able to take teacher feedback and use it to revise, as well as the times when they used feedback against their own judgment. Drawing on Alice Glarden Brand's affective continuum to code the open responses qualitatively, the researchers found that students' expressions of those negative moments often reflected hierarchy, felt disrespect, and confusion; their desire was most often for more time and space, for respect, and for clearly worded, consistent instructions.

### Introduction

A student gets "tough" feedback from a teacher who is trying to push her, who sees in her the possibility of excellence. The student feels challenged. How to bridge the gap between her negative feeling and the teacher's sense of how strong a writer she might be? There are myriad factors that play roles in the felt experience of the feedback process, and the researchers wanted to understand better how students experience and perceive negative moments, as well as what factors remain salient in their minds after the fact. This study provides preliminary qualitative insight into perceptions of feedback processes, what students carry with them to shape ongoing perceptions of feedback.

While we note some patterns that emerge regarding positive feeling in feedback scenarios, we concerned ourselves primarily with those moments when students expressed that their agency or authority had been usurped rather than when productive collaboration, negotiation, and integration of new perspectives occurred. The latter represent positive perceptions of pedagogical moments to us while the former are likely to shut down learning rather than generating it. Thus, our research questions are these:

- What factors do students identify as connected with negative feeling toward instructor feedback or shutdown in their ability to use that feedback for revision?
- Do students feel pressured by instructor feedback to craft texts that do not reflect their values or intentions, but rather conform to meet the instructor's expectations? If so, when?
- Are there typical types of feedback or response scenarios that students report leading to these negative affective responses more often than others?

Extrapolating from these questions, we sought to offer instructors across the disciplines and other providers of writing feedback, particularly in hierarchical situations such as supervisor-writer, ways of reducing negative affect, choosing instead methods that would encourage positive support and collaboration.

### Literature Review

One of the key assumptions of this study is that affect matters broadly in student use of feedback. Writing studies has long recognized affective dimensions as classroom concerns (Albrecht-Crane, 2006; Edbauer, 2005; Glarden Brand, 1994a, 1994b, 1987/2009; McLeod, 1997; Micciche, 2005, 2006), in part because of the field's alignments with rhetorical study and its understanding of *pathos* or emotion in any rhetorical act, and in part because of the attention given to affect and emotion in feminist theory. Early discussions of affect in the field draw heavily on psychological study to define the term, breaking it into multiple categories such as "emotions, attitudes, beliefs, moods, and conation (motivation)" (McLeod, 1997, p. 9). McLeod and others including Alice Glarden Brand (1994) initiated arguments for the centrality and value of considering affect in writing studies: "We need to come to terms with affect, viewing the affect/cognition split not as a dichotomy but as a dialectic" (McLeod, 1997, p. 7).

In 2006, Micciche suggested that the affective dimension injects productive "trouble" into rhetoric. By trouble she means challenge, disruption, and change. Writing that is powerful emerges from a sense that something's wrong and pushes against norms. Teaching and learning, by extension, is a complex series of related rhetorical acts in which, through affect and cognition in combination, learners develop their ethical reasoning and experience productive trouble.

Especially relevant to our research are Dowden, Pittaway, Yost, and McCarthy's (2013) study of student perceptions of feedback and Pat Young's (2000) study of self-esteem and feedback. The former drew on survey and focus group data collection, resulting in the authors' call for increased attention to the relationships between emotion and feedback. And the latter study of the self-esteem of six participants and its relationship to feedback reveals, unsurprisingly, that self-esteem seems to significantly affect student response to feedback: students with higher self-esteem had more positive attitudes towards receiving feedback and often even perceived negative comments as positive, while students with lower self-esteem

often took comments as “an indictment of themselves” (Young, 2000, p. 414) and displayed more need for positive feedback.

Yet, in spite of this growing body of research, less is known about affect’s roles in feedback and revision than is desirable, given the centrality of feedback and revision to effective writing instruction. If people decide based more or at least equally on how they feel, value, and believe than on logic and evidence, going with their guts, as cognitive studies suggest (Damasio, 1994, among others), affect is worth further examination: “If we . . . view emotion as connected to our rational and ethical lives, we open a space of possibility for reimagining our approaches to teaching, research, and administration” (Jacobs and Micciche, 2003, p. 5).

Worldwide, studies have documented student experiences with feedback, including what students report works best. Even when not looking specifically for affect, these studies reveal ways that feedback is tied to students’ emotions, values, and beliefs. For instance, James Brown (2007) determined that his business students in Scotland valued specific feedback (see also Scott, 2014) and were frustrated by inconsistency between feedback and grades. A study of Pakistani students by Muhammad Asif Nadeem and Tahir Nadeem (2013) confirmed that students find positive feedback motivating and negative or no feedback demotivating. Ann Poulos and Mary Jane Mahony’s (2008) study of students at the University of Sydney indicated that feedback can even provide emotional support for learners, but that teacher credibility may be key to unleashing this potential. The timing and form of the feedback also makes a difference: formative is superior to summative feedback, largely because the summative kind often comes too late (Pokorny & Pickford, 2010). Finally, Shirley Scott’s (2014) study at the University of South Wales revealed multiple key factors in students’ experiences of feedback effectiveness: timeliness, constructiveness, specificity, and continuity. Our study confirms and extends several of these studies’ findings.

Our review of the literature also revealed scholarly concerns with regard to authority and control, useful to contextualizing and shedding some light on our survey design and responses, particularly our focus on more negative student experience. In her 1982 article, Nancy Sommers found that “teachers’ comments can take students’ attention away from their own purposes . . . and focus that attention on the teachers’ purpose in commenting” (p. 149). Similarly, Brannon and Knoblauch (1982) suggested that teacher comments, while well intended, may exert authorized control in a way that leads to students’ disengagement from writing tasks (p. 159). Jody Underwood and Alyson Tregidgo (2006) linked the issue of control to feedback reception scenarios, suggesting the possibility that “it is the level of control [student and/or teacher] over student writing that really impacts how comments are received and heeded in the revision process” (p. 82). Their article generated recommendations stemming from the following two findings: student preference for “positive feedback” (including “praise”) and “specific” feedback (p. 84). Straub (1996) considered the issue of control explicitly in “The Concept of Control in Teacher Response” and contended that “all teacher comments in some way are evaluative and directive” (p. 247). In his review of the literature, Anders Jonsson (2013) identified teacher “authoritative feedback” as “not productive” (p. 68). The student responses to our open-ended survey questions sometimes brought to the surface these issues of authority and control, indicating, for instance, that many students desire directive feedback despite the potential problems stemming from an (even inadvertent) overzealous use of control.

Of course, the teacher-student relationship has long been recognized as a key to student success (see Astin, 1993). More specifically, notable research on the collaborative relationship between teachers and students includes Nancy Sommers’ (2006) “Harvard Study of Undergraduate Writing,” an extensive longitudinal study that convinced her of the importance of feedback within an “apprentice scholars” framework of sustained collaborative interactions (p. 250). This framework identified roles for both the teacher and, perhaps more importantly for Sommers, the student; she argued that “we too often neglect the role of the student in this transaction, and the vital partnership between teacher and student, by focusing, almost exclusively, on the role of the teacher” (p. 249). Our own study took care to focus on the student experience, and found evidence within our survey’s responses that points to the efficacy of Sommers’ apprentice-scholar ideal, which aims for respectful guidance rather than strictly top-down authority.

Other explorations of the teacher-student relationship, viewed through the lens of our interest in student identification of negative feelings or shutdown, include Brannon and Knoblauch’s (1982) analysis of “teacher response,” which stressed a dialogic, collaborative approach that should play out over time, drafts, and “negotiation” (p. 163). Brannon and Knoblauch suggested the potential dangers associated with a student’s lack of authority when it comes to textual decision-making, a concern mirrored in our study, particularly with regard to appropriation. In his investigation of the student-teacher relationship, Lad Tobin (1993) acknowledged teacher authority in the writing classroom as well as potential teacher discomfort with having that authority. He recounted a student conference feedback scenario wherein he realized he unwittingly took control, perhaps even ownership, of the student’s text: “to keep the process going, I needed to provide a great deal of structure, so much that I no longer viewed the draft as his” (p. 55). This scenario seems to demonstrate appropriation to a degree Brannon and Knoblauch (1982) and we would caution against.

In spite of this rich body of inquiry regarding feedback and revision, we are not satisfied that we have complete enough understanding of the often hierarchical collaboration (to borrow a term from Ede and Lunsford, 1992) that is the teacher-student feedback loop. Ongoing questions in writing studies about the tandem issues of shutdown and compliance in the face of feedback and increased attention to affective dimensions of teaching and learning provide a framework to consider negative affect and shutdown in feedback and revision processes.

## Methods

Beyond our review of the literature, our research tool was a survey<sup>1</sup>, which we piloted locally and then expanded for national distribution. The survey was a blend of open and closed questions (see appendix A), and was meant to elicit qualitative responses about how students feel and what attitudes and beliefs they carry with them from previous revision experiences. The survey instrument allowed us to ask for information from students involved in feedback revision processes in a space removed from the immediate hierarchy of a classroom or the potential pressure of a face-to-face interview (wherein a respondent may be asked about negative feedback experiences with a hierarchical superior). We are aware of the concerns raised within scholarship regarding student self-reporting, particularly Porter’s (2011) critique of college student surveys, and we acknowledge that potential limitations of our study include respondents’ ability to recall experiences across a (potential) number of years. We took care to

<sup>1</sup>State U IRB Protocol #HS13068

design our instrument in a way that avoided “educational jargon” (Porter, 2011, p. 53) that may confuse respondents

The fall 2012 pilot included a survey and interviews of first-year writers at State U alone, which helped us to test and revise our approach, including refining the survey questions and distributing the survey to a wider pool of potential responders: any student who had taken a writing-intensive college class (more than ten pages of finished, graded writing)<sup>2</sup> in any discipline. To reach this population, we distributed the survey<sup>3</sup> through the mid-sized research university student listserv, student listservs at other higher education institutions, the listservs of professional organizations and social networking media with the invitation for people in our networks to share the link. For distribution, we used a snowball method (Heckathorn, 1997), useful for gaining wider distribution and for increasing anonymity. As a result of these changes, we not only received a larger response (343 total/212 fully completed responses), but the survey also yielded information that more fully addressed our research questions.

In our analysis, we first looked for trends in the closed questions to inform our reading of the more open-ended questions. In this article, a portion of our larger study, we discuss only selected questions that might shed light on negative affect and shutdown, the more qualitative end of our study. This means we deal here primarily with the open-ended questions, using a coding system we co-developed based on affect theory. Given that the focus of our study is how students feel in particular pedagogical situations, “listening” to them seemed important.<sup>4</sup>

We developed and applied our codes in response to three of the open-ended questions:

- #15: Tell us about the instance when you had the most trouble taking feedback from your instructor. What was the feedback? What made the feedback hard to take?
- #18 (follow up to #17, a Likert scale question: Did you ever come to agree with or feel positively about a piece of feedback or advice that you initially resisted/disagreed with?): If so, can you explain what happened to make you change your mind?
- #21: Is there anything else you would like to share with us about the revision process and feedback from instructors?

Brand and Richard Graves’s (1994) collection, *Presence of Mind*, particularly Brand’s contributions to that collection, gave us a way to think of the varied affective dimensions experienced in teaching and learning interactions, providing preliminary categories that we refined in the first phases of coding (see Figure One).

In “Defining Our Emotional Life,” Brand suggested that we might productively think of intellect and emotion on a continuum; though she reminds us that both are always in play, one or the other may be manifested more strongly (1994a, p. 155). In this article, Brand also defined an affective continuum, suggesting that on the “hot” end it is represented by arousal and emotion: “such unequivocal and irrepressible behaviors as an infant crying,” while “at the ‘cold’ end of the continuum, mental content is heavily processed and seemingly barren of emotion” (1994a, p. 155). Because Brand defines emotion as those moments when felt sense (physiological) becomes named, we

divided emotion into positive and negative occurrences and allowed the subcategories (the types of emotion expressed) to emerge largely from the responses. These included feeling disrespected or stupid, shame, frustration, irritation, and disappointment. Such emotion words were fairly easy to spot in the responses, as were key trigger phrases such as “I feel/felt.”

Brand deepened our understanding of the affective continuum through close examination of what she calls the “cool” areas of affect: attitudes, beliefs, values, and motivations. These cool responses emerge often in teaching and learning scenarios, so they shaped our categories significantly. Attitudes, Brand suggested, are “a relatively enduring organization of beliefs around an object or situation predisposing individuals to respond in some preferential manner” (Rokeach, as cited in Brand, 1994b, pp. 167-68). Beliefs “are propositions about the world held as true” (Brand, 1994b, p. 168). Both attitudes and beliefs may involve judgment (good/bad) or evaluation (better/worse). And a third related category, values, has “considerable” overlap with attitudes and beliefs, according to Brand, because it is “learned and expressed in choices” (1994a, p. 169). In fact, some psychologists treat values and beliefs as “interchangeable” (Brand, 1994b, p. 170). Because the survey responses were generally too brief to finely differentiate in this way, we clustered these responses under “attitudes and beliefs.”

Brand defined our third major affect coding category, motivation, as “mental initiative.” “. . . [M]otivation is more than preparatory. It keeps us invested with psychological energy—conscious or not conscious—until we get what we want or abandon it or accept a substitute” (1994b, p. 173). Many motivation responses described attitudes, beliefs, or perspective shifts leading to (or shutting down) action.

The fourth major coding category, the creation of affective space and/or time, is not an affective state. Rather, it is a factor that seems to influence students’ affective experiences of teacher feedback. We define it thus: the expressed desire, either implicitly or explicitly, for additional time or space for reflection, reaction, dialogue, or effort. We found that respondents often linked the need for space or time to process and respond with making it possible or impossible for them to move past a challenging feedback experience toward revision. We therefore created this category to track the frequency and types of space/time references, as we felt they might be important to our recommendations to teachers.

To seek validity, we grappled with many of the issues raised by Keith Grant-Davie (1992) in his discussion of qualitative coding. We sought to make our codes broad enough to capture patterns in the responses without “pigeonhol[ing]” any response or forcing it (Grant Davie, 1992, p. 277). We also allowed for both code and subcode and more than one code per response. Many responses revealed multiple potential affective dimensions, such as feeling disrespected while simultaneously acknowledging a conflict of beliefs about the teacher/student relationship.

We chose question 18’s open-ended follow-up question for a preliminary reliability test of the codes. On the first pass, we found that we had too a high degree of discrepancy, unsurprising given that we studied something more complex and nuanced than lexical

<sup>2</sup>In hindsight, other demographic filters may have proved helpful to get at particular groups’ distinctive needs (for example, L2 status, year in college, and major).

<sup>3</sup>We are grateful to survey research expert Christi McGeorge for her assistance in improving the survey methods for this study.

<sup>4</sup>Throughout, when quoting students’ open-ended responses, we have preserved their language: errors, shorthand, and all.

categories, for instance<sup>5</sup>. Therefore, we returned to the codes, defining each more completely, adding a few that had emerged, and discussing categorizations about which we initially disagreed. We then applied the codes to the other question responses. Finally, we returned to question 18 to verify that our coding still worked after having tested them on all of the questions. This process substantially increased our levels of consistency.

Again, we recognize the many critiques of the validity of student surveys, including Stephen Porter's discussion of the problems with the NSSE survey. However, our study is substantially different from purely quantitative surveys, seeking more qualitative responses to the questions of what students believe, how they see revision, and therefore what emotional and affective bubbles surround and color their writing experiences. To quantitative researchers it may seem scandalous, but to a certain degree, what actually happened in these writing situations doesn't really matter; what the students believe happened, how they interpret what happened, and what they carry with them to the next writing situation is what we seek to understand. What kinds of attitudes, emotions, and beliefs come to characterize revision and feedback experiences, and how might we help mitigate the negative aspects?

## Results

Our suspicion was that students are likely to feel both positively and negatively affected by their teachers' responses, and we were also interested in the ways teacher feedback was powerful, even enmeshed coauthorship. As in other studies (Pokorny & Pickford, 2010; Scott, 2014), students do report wanting feedback. To "Do you typically want feedback on your writing?" 189 of 257 responses indicated "always," 49 responded "sometimes," 12 indicated "occasionally," and only 7 responded either "rarely" or "never." Yet some students might desire the feedback simply to know where they stand (Scott, 2014) and not to move the writing forward through revision; we're more interested in the latter.

To determine even more fully the extent to which instructor feedback influences revision processes, we asked "Generally, what factor or factors influence your revision process the most? (Select the top two)." Instructor feedback was, by far, the highest response (see Figure Two). 208 of 483 answers indicated instructor feedback was influential. 100 identified self-evaluation of the draft, 66 the grade they received, and 57 peer feedback. Similarly, when asked what impact instructor feedback had on the assignment they revised most in the last year, 150 of 257 answered "very strong influence," 88 indicated they were somewhat influenced, and only a total of 14 answers suggested the instructor feedback had little to no influence.

Several things are worth noting here. First, if we consider the grade a part of instructor feedback, we can see even further how important the teacher role is in affecting revision. Second, we were happy to discover that 100 (20.7%) of the responses said self-evaluation played an important role. To help student writers develop self-reflection and self-critique abilities is a major goal, not to the exclusion of getting outside readers, but as a key skillset and clearly tied to control and authority over text. However, as some of our analysis of the open-ended questions in the survey suggest, hierarchy and teacher authority may, at times, play a negative role, reducing students' trust in their own evaluations and negatively impacting their sense of the process as a whole.

## Question 5

Generally, what factor or factors influence your revision process the most? (select the top two)

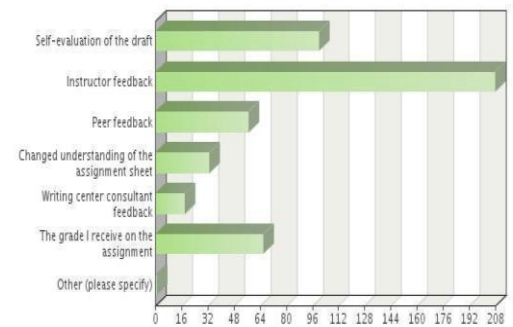


Figure 1: Influences on Revision Process

## What Do Students Say Generates Negative Affect?

One of the categories in which we found most frequent suggestion of felt negative experience was Hierarchy under the umbrella of Motivation (eighteen negative instances total), with the negative responses identifying the instructor (thirteen instances) and institutional frameworks (five instances) as influential. Hierarchy responses articulated an encounter with an institutional or societal power structure. At issue here is student recognition and perception of decision-making agency in the classroom, and the ways the instructor—most often framed as the instructor's agenda, desire, or "wants"—seems, at times, to embody hierarchy for students.

We found it noteworthy that not all of the hierarchy responses came across negatively; some responses (8 instances) indicated appreciation for the presence of an authority figure within the feedback-revision process. For example, one respondent commented, "I like feedback to let me know how well I did," a statement that places evaluation outside the learner, which may not lead the student to greater autonomy as a writer but does acknowledge the student's desire for instructor insight.

Motivation through "instructor agenda" responses tended to show signs of negative experience with feedback, as in one respondent's recollection of one-on-one conferences with an instructor: "I do all of the revisions they suggest to get a better grade. After the revision, I feel that the paper is not true to what I understood from the novels or true to my style of writing." Some responses expressed willingness to accede to such expectations, if only they were made clear; as one respondent wrote, "I wish teachers would tell us what they want from the beginning rather than expecting us to guess." Other responses convey a sharper sense of frustration; as one respondent commented on feedback difficulties: the "instructor didn't have any space for differences. It had to be her way."

Elsewhere, evidence of conformity emerged. One student focuses on the grade, "what the instructor wanted," and "catering" to instructor wishes. Again, we might read this as being sensitive to audience, but we felt the tone and implications of word choice in this answer were negative enough to signal a problematic or concerning

<sup>5</sup>Thanks to Karen Lunsford, Jo Mackiewicz, Jason Swarts, and Rebecca Rickly for their guidance and feedback at the CCCC coding workshop in Indianapolis, 2014.

experience: “The bright spot of getting a D on a paper was that I knew what the instructor wanted and catered to that format. I worked harder and received an A for an overall grade.” The student does not talk about improving the writing, learning, a changed perspective or new insight, nor about reaching an audience to achieve some kind of meaning.

Some respondents connect hierarchically charged experience to institutional structures. For example, one respondent pointed to the university rubric as a source of conflict, noting, “They wanted a completely different structured paper one that seemed very elementary. She said she didn’t care cuz that was what the university rubric wanted.” In this case, the respondent seems not only aware of outside influences on feedback and revision, but characterizes that influence negatively—concerns about the elementary nature of the paper’s structure were overridden by the demands of the rubric.

In other cases, respondents demonstrated some awareness of institutional rankings and chains-of-command: one respondent spoke of difficulty taking feedback when a TA’s grade was lowered by a teacher; another specifically targeted tenured professors as problematic figures in the revision-feedback process, stating: “Instructors seem to get a kick out of totally demoralizing students. Tenured professors are the worst. There is no motivation for them to be more helpful.” Where this belief has come from, we can’t know. However, we ignore our students’ beliefs about institutional structures at the peril of compromised learning, as well as the potential reinforcement of stereotypes.

Misconstrued or misunderstood conceptions of institutional frameworks could result in felt pressure negatively shaping a student’s perspective; additionally, the realities of institutional controls—grading, rubrics, chains of authority extending outside of the classroom—have an impact on classroom practices and student revision. Increased transparency may help to mitigate perceived pressure and/or felt negative experiences, as could the explicit highlighting on the part of the instructor of areas where agency and choice are possible.

### Teacher/Student Relationship

A total of 27 open answers (16 negative; 11 positive) referred directly to the teacher-student relationship affecting feedback use. The most negative of these responses are rooted in their experiences with feedback and revision as personal: events interpreted by students as personal attacks or perceived personality conflicts. The most positive responses refer to collaboration, face-to-face discussions, and perspective shifts for the student writers. The latter echoes Pokorny and Pickford’s (2010) finding: “Where students felt they had good feedback relationships that promoted engagement and confidence, they characterized these tutors as, ‘relaxed, approachable, supportive, down to earth, playful, open and willing to have discussions and debates’ but ‘strict enough so the class doesn’t take it as a party’” (p. 26).

In this study, when feedback seems directed at the writer or the writer’s values, not the text, the student’s perception is negative. “The feedback was directed towards me, not my paper,” commented one student, while another responded “the feedback only supported the teacher’s opinion, not mine.” We were surprised to find that only two respondents alluded to politically-informed conflict. One spoke of a more general kind of belief pushing. The other, more overt, named political stances: “I am conservative and had an EXTREMELY liberal teacher who knocked everything in my paper saying I had no ‘real’ information to hold my paper up with. Basically said that my ‘.com’ information was only as good as things found on wikipedia in his opinion.” Even taking into account other responses that may possibly

imply such conflicts (for example, “Being treated as though my beliefs and opinions are something less than that of the instructor was really irritating...”) this is still far less a representation of such conflict than we expected to see.

Other respondents seemed more actively to personalize the experience: “The most trouble I have had taking feedback was when a teacher, in a very accusing tone, told me that I did not follow the assignment. My personal feelings were that I had followed the assignment to the best of my ability, given my understanding of the assignment.” Even indications that a teacher didn’t “like” the document may signal the student’s sense that personal taste plays a role in feedback when it’s not working well. A related response addresses conflict rooted in personality clashes. “I had trouble taking feedback when I didn’t like the instructor or felt the grading was unfair” (excerpted). The language of the first half-- “didn’t like the instructor”—is about the person in its construction, which leads us to believe that personality conflict can be problematic, though we suspect this category hides many other kinds of conflict such as clashing belief systems.

Positively framed statements about the function of the teacher-student relationship tended to focus on the creation of dialogic space, occasionally taking place in one-on-one, office-hours-type locations. One student, speaking of factors that changed his or her mind about a piece of previously resisted feedback, identified “The instructor setting up office time to visit and go over the paper together.” We learn from these positive responses that “explanation,” “constructive criticism,” “visits” to the teacher’s office, “advice,” and “direction,” even peers as mediators between writer and instructor (a bit like Brooke’s 1987 use of the sociological term “underlife”) are positive approaches that seem welcomed by the students in our survey population.

A positive teacher/student relationship can prove instrumental to fostering a potentially useful perspective shift, such as the situation described in this student response:

I relied on instructor feedback to help me improve my writing. Personal, one-on-one feedback was most helpful as I could really understand the expectation and the reasoning. Written notes on the paper were less helpful. I even sought feedback on assignments that had been graded with no chance to improve my grade so I better understood my instructor’s expectations. That helped me improve my writing as I could watch out for those errors the next time I had a paper for that class. Combined with feedback from other instructors, my writing improved.

Speaking in terms of both shifting perspective and the importance placed by students on the student-teacher relationship, the conclusions we draw from our analysis of the survey responses seems to confirm other findings indicating the importance of the teacher-student relationship. A positively framed teacher-student relationship can create the kind of feedback loop that helps student writers develop skills for engaging with constructive criticism, thus propelling them forward on their continuing quest for rhetorical agency.

### Emotion

Central to our focus on the affective dimension were our emotion codes, representing a range of possible feelings student writers might experience. At twenty-four instances, disrespect was the most common response, followed by seven instances of frustration, four of irritation, two of disappointment, and one instance of shame.

The language choices made by respondents with regard to felt

disrespect tended to be strong: one student spoke of a “very accusing tone” and “offensive remarks” by the instructor; others referred to received feedback as “derogatory,” “condescending and negative,” and presented in a “not necessarily constructive but condescending” manner. Another response, identifying the causes of hard-to-take feedback, simply stated, “made me feel stupid.” We were not surprised to see disrespect as the most frequent code. Writing and feedback often play out as personalized endeavors, involving emotional investment and writers who may already feel ashamed or embarrassed by their perceived lack of knowledge or skill.

This study suggests that at least some students do “take it personally.” Our primary takeaway remains focused on the felt student experience. Some students do feel disrespected by feedback, and we believe there are ways to reduce those experiences. Beyond avoiding attacking and personalizing our feedback, the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* (CWPA, NCTE, and NWP, 2011) offers additional guidance: work with students to develop the habits of mind helpful to shaping attitudes, skills, and behaviors surrounding writing. Persistence, seeing critique as helpful, even using critical thinking to filter feedback may mitigate the felt disrespect.

### Conclusion: How to Reduce Negative Affective Experience?

Based on our findings, we suggest a range of practices to help mitigate the occurrence or feeling of felt negative experiences in the feedback-revision process. The potential solutions are varied and choosing from them will, of course, be dependent on existing practices and context. We think further testing of these strategies is also warranted and invite other researchers to use this study as a springboard.

Perhaps the most powerful, though not entirely new, pedagogical strategy is creating affective space/time with and for student writers. We might add language into class policies requiring a “waiting period” for feedback review during office hours to allow the cool end of the affective spectrum to develop<sup>6</sup>. Many instructors already ask students to “cool down” and reflect on our feedback before coming to talk to us, but few build in structured check-in points after the cooling has happened. In a cycle of feedback and revision, we suggest trying a staggered approach, such as giving students feedback on the page (or even video or audio files) and then conferring with them later, such as at least four days, to have them discuss their plans and confusions.

Many teachers also hand back projects with written feedback and no discussion, particularly with advanced students in the major, relying on them to come to us when they deem necessary. This approach encourages independent learning; however, asking students to make plans and have a discussion about those plans reinforces some of the Habits of Mind, such as responsibility and metacognition, highlighted in the *Framework for Success* (CWPA, NCTE, and NWP, 2011).

An additional suggestion stems from the most commonly reported affective response: disrespect. Increased awareness of student sensitivity to the personal and affective nature of the feedback-revision cycle may help to further shape our responses to focus on the rhetorical situation, reducing the perception that the writing or writer is inherently bad and carefully attending to the language of respect, choice, and control in our interchanges with students.

Further, discussions of beliefs about writing, teaching, and

learning methods may help students reflect on and better understand textual practices such as revision. It might also be useful to make transparent some of the controlling factors embedded within our institutions. Making students aware of institutional standards, and even constraints, may help to mitigate negative feelings stemming from confusion about expectations and may increase students’ ability to make informed rhetorical decisions and to better understand the institutional demands impacting their writing.

Again and again in their responses, students desired relatively stable expectations, completely expressed. Their sense that the expectations slipped or changed created frustration in many of our respondents. Though teachers may be working to develop understanding by scaffolding material, the frustration is real. Reviewing the assignment and rubric at the beginning of a unit, indicating that students will come to understand it in more detail as the class proceeds, and highlighting the portions of the rubric we’re addressing periodically through the unit (during analysis of models, invention workshops, peer response) may help students to see that criteria stay relatively stable even though their understanding evolves. Additionally, highlighting the potential for changes in expectations or requirements—and, more importantly, discussing why change is not uncommon in writing—may not only lead to less confusion on the part of students, but may also enhance their understanding of writing as a social phenomenon.

Accepting and processing feedback on one’s work is one of the greatest challenges a writer can face, often fraught with emotion and embedded in hierarchical structures that can and do lead to a sense of lost control. Students, as less experienced writers, likely feel this emotional tangle more fundamentally. This study aims to focus our attention on that affective experience, highlighting small ways teachers may intervene instructionally to educate through and with emotion. In addition, taking transparent steps to mitigate negative emotional experiences in the writing-intensive classroom may help students to negotiate better and change their experiences of textual production, increasing their sense of positive agency and control.

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and Google Hangouts provide less burdensome options for face-to-face conferring.

<sup>6</sup>Office space and hours for many non-tenure-track instructors (aka “contingent” or “adjunct”) are likely problematic. For those for whom the office is mobile, virtual office hours through programs such as Skype, Facetime,



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## Appendix A: Survey

### 1. Please indicate your gender.

- Female
- Male
- Transgender
- Other (please specify)

### 2. Have you taken at least one writing-intensive (at least 10 pages of finished, graded writing) college class?

- Yes
- No (Thank you. You may end the survey.)

### 3. Do you typically want feedback on your writing?

- Always
- Sometimes
- Occasionally
- Rarely
- Never

### 4. Generally, what factor or factors influence your revision process the most? (select the top two)

- Self-evaluation of the draft
- Instructor feedback
- Peer feedback
- Changed understanding of the assignment sheet
- Center for Writers consultant feedback
- The grade I receive on the assignment
- Other (please specify)

### 5. Please indicate how strongly your instructor's feedback influenced the revisions you made to the assignment you revised the most in the last year.

- Very strong influence
- Somewhat influenced
- Little influence
- No influence
- N/A

### 6. If you did not use most of your instructor's feedback, please explain why not.

### 7. To what extent did you agree with the feedback you received from your instructor on your most recent writing assignment?

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree or disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

### 8. On your most recent writing assignment, to what degree did you or do you plan to revise the assignment?

- Completely
- Substantially
- Partially
- A little
- Not at all

### 9. Did you ever make changes in your writing that you did not want to make?

- Yes, frequently
- Occasionally
- Rarely
- Never

### 10. What kind(s) of changes did you make that you didn't want to make (select as many as apply)

- Word choice changes
- Style sheet changes (MLA/APA/AP/Chicago)
- Organization (moving paragraphs around, restructuring paragraphs, adding sections)
- Changing my entire main claim (thesis statement)
- Including counterevidence that I didn't want to include
- Format or design changes (the visual and layout aspects of the document)
- Making my tone more academic
- Making my tone more passionate
- Changes to affect flow (getting more sentence lengths and varieties and/or having useful transitions)

- Removing parts of my paper
- Including or addressing missing required elements (Explain here)
- Other (Explain here)
- N/A

**11. Did you ever receive feedback that stopped you from revising?**

- Yes, frequently
- Occasionally
- Rarely
- Never

**12. What was it about the feedback that stopped you? (select all that apply)**

- Too many things to change
- I already had a high enough grade.
- The tone of the feedback was mean or not encouraging.
- I didn't understand the feedback.
- There wasn't enough feedback.
- There wasn't enough time to make the changes.
- I didn't think I would get enough of a grade increase to make it worth it.
- I didn't care about the project.
- I revised a different project from the same class instead.
- My other classes were more important.
- My personal life got in the way.
- Other (please specify)
- N/A

**13. Recalling a negative experience with an instructor's feedback, what was the focus of the feedback?**

- Grammar and editing
- Tone
- Organization
- Thesis
- Evidence (not enough, not the right evidence)
- Topic choice
- Not enough sources
- Bad sources
- Transitions
- Design and/or formatting
- Other (fill in blank)
- N/A. I haven't had a negative experience with teacher feedback.

**14. Recalling a negative experience with instructor feedback, how was the feedback delivered? (check all that apply)**

- Conference
- An end comment on the paper
- Writing throughout the paper
- Teacher asking questions in writing or in person
- Commands from the teacher about what had to be done
- A conversation with the teacher
- Instructions to follow for changing the writing
- Just a grade
- A grade and an evaluation word, such as "unacceptable" or "incomplete"
- A rubric (a grading form with criteria related to the assignment)
- Number scores relating to assignment criteria
- General feedback to the entire class related to a drafted assignment
- N/A. I haven't had a negative experience with teacher feedback.

**15. Tell us about the instance when you had the most trouble taking feedback from your instructor. What was the feedback?  
What made the feedback hard to take?**

**16. If you ever had a negative experience with teacher feedback on a project, how would you characterize that experience?  
(select all that apply)**

- Uncomfortable
- Annoying

- Troubling
- Confusing
- Disorienting
- Coercive
- Intimidating
- Pressuring
- Tense
- Stressful
- Personal
- Impersonal
- Cold
- Disappointing
- Off putting
- Condescending
- Overwhelming
- Other (fill in blank)
- N/A

**17. Did you ever come to agree with or feel positively about a piece of feedback or advice that you initially resisted/disagreed with?**

- Yes, frequently
- Yes, occasionally
- Rarely
- Never

**18. If so, can you explain what happened to make you change your mind?**

**19. Were your writing assignments stronger after you revised using feedback from your instructor?**

- Yes, my assignments were stronger
- Yes, my assignments were somewhat stronger
- Some of my assignments were stronger and some were weaker
- No, I did not notice a change in my assignments
- No, my assignments were weaker
- N/A: I did not revise using feedback from my instructor

**20. Think about the instance when you felt your writing was stronger after revision with teacher feedback. Did the grade also go up?**

- Yes, the grade went up substantially
- Yes, the grade went up a little
- No, the grade did not change
- No, the grade went down.
- N/A My writing has not been improved through revision with teacher feedback.

**21. Is there anything else you would like to share with us about the revision process and feedback?**

## Appendix B

Table 1. Where/when do students feel disruptions and frustrations in feedback?

Category	Sub-categories (more than one instance in responses)	Definition	Example
<b>Emotion</b>	Negative: § Disrespected/Feeling stupid § Shame § Frustration § Irritation § Disappointment Positive: § Connection § Satisfaction	When felt sense (physiological) becomes named. We looked for “state emotions . . . characteristic of our affective life at a given moment” (Brand, 1994a, p. 161).	Q 15 50: “The most trouble is when my paper gets torn to shreds. The red marks are <i>intimidating</i> and make you feel <i>pretty bad</i> . However, ultimately, you know it’s useful and helpful in the long run.”
<b>Beliefs and Attitudes</b>	§ About tasks (value and form) § About writing § About politics § About teaching and learning	Attitudes: “a relatively enduring organization of beliefs around an object or situation predisposing individuals to respond in some preferential manner” (Rokeach, as cited in Brand 1994b, pp. 167-8).  Beliefs “are propositions about the world held as true” (Brand, 1994b, p. 168).	Q 21 18: “ <i>I believe that a well structured and consistent rubric is very important</i> in regards to a writing assignment. Writing, in most genres, can often be seen as subjective, when really a positive and concise rubric can take away a lot of the mystery of writing. . .”
<b>Motivation, Positive and Negative</b>	§ Grade § Disinterest/ Interest § No option to revise § Shifting expectations/ process § Hierarchy § Difficulty § Lack of authority § New perspective § Relationship § Teaching/learning beliefs § Product orientation § Agency (and choice) § Ease	“Mental initiative.” “. . . [M]otivation is more than preparatory. It keeps us invested with psychological energy—conscious or not conscious—until we get what we want or abandon it or accept a substitute” (Brand, 1994b, p. 173).	Q 21 48: “When I have a <i>conference</i> with the professor, <i>I do all of the revisions they suggest to get a better grade</i> . After the revision, I feel that the paper is not true to what I understood from the novels or true to my style of writing.”
<b>Creation of Affective Space and Time</b>		Expressed desire, either implicitly or explicitly, for additional time or space for reflection, reaction, dialogue, or effort.	Q 15 39: “It wasn’t the negativity of the instructor but my own frustration of having to do it again and feeling <i>overwhelmed with school and working full time (45-60) hours a week at work</i> .” (partial)